

Andy Birkey, *Minnesota Independent*

Democratic Reps. Tim Walz and Betty McCollum are asking Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to commit funds for the relocation of Iraqi Armenians - who, as Christians, face persecution - back to Armenia. The lawmakers say that Armenia has taken significant steps to welcome the refugees, including offering land and citizenship.

"It is in the interest of the U.S. that Iraqi Armenian Christian refugees be provided the opportunity to start a new life in safety and peace," said McCollum in a press release on Tuesday. "The Armenian government's offer to receive refugees is very generous, and I believe the U.S. should provide the humanitarian support necessary to ensure their successful relocation and integration into Armenian society."

While not a signatory on the letter, Rep. Collin Peterson has joined Walz and McCollum in supporting the effort.

Here's the full text of the letter:

May 14, 2010

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton

Secretary of State

U.S. Department of State

2201 C Street NW

Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton:

We are writing to urge the Obama Administration to make a commitment of funds to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to assist in the resettlement of Iraqi Armenian Christian refugees from Syria and Jordan to Armenia. It is our understanding that the State Department is in the process of formulating the Administration's response in support of UNHCR's 2010 Global Appeal for Iraq. We feel strongly that it is essential that an initial and specific U.S. commitment is made to meeting the needs of Iraqi Armenian Christian refugees.

According to a March 30, 2010 UNHCR press release, conditions for Iraqi refugees both inside and outside of Iraq are becoming increasingly desperate at the very time that international concern appears to be fading. "The dwindling media interest in Iraqi refugees," the UNHCR says, "is not matched by a decline in the scale of the problem."

With a planned U.S. troop withdrawal by the end of 2011, dwindling international support for Iraqi refugees, and the campaign of violence against Iraqi Christians continuing unabated, the U.S. must fulfill its obligation to this vulnerable population.

As you know, the State Department's 2008 allocation of \$1 million to UNHCR Armenia has enabled more than one thousand Iraqi refugees to begin to rebuild their lives via resettlement in Armenia. It has been a cost-effective and regional solution for a group that might otherwise seek resettlement in the United States.

UNHCR's "Regional Response Plan for Iraqi Refugees" released in January 2010 identifies hundreds of Iraqi Armenian Christian refugees registered with UNHCR in Jordan. The number of refugees in Syria, the primary asylum destination for Armenian Christians fleeing Iraq, is known to be significantly larger. Of the more than two million refugees who have fled Iraq, only a small portion, less than 20 percent, have been registered by UNHCR thus far. Since hopes for successful repatriation and reintegration in Iraq have failed to materialize it is certain that the need for resettlement of Iraqi Armenian refugees will persist for the foreseeable future.

It is our understanding that the Government of Armenia has made a formal commitment to U.N. High Commissioner Antonio Guterres to: offer all Iraqi Armenian refugees a track to citizenship; formally participate in UNHCR's Iraqi resettlement program; and make land and facilities available for refugees from Iraq to rebuild their lives. Armenia has, in fact, delivered on these promises substantially over the last two years.

The U.S. commitment of additional funds to UNHCR will allow UNHCR in Armenia to extend its assistance to Iraqi Armenian Christians while allowing for an accelerated resettlement of additional refugees from Syria and Jordan to Armenia.

Again, we urge the Obama Administration to sustain the momentum of what UNHCR, the United States, and Armenia have already accomplished on behalf of Iraqi Armenian Christian refugees.

Sincerely,

Betty McCollum

Frank Pallone, Jr.

Adam Schiff

Tim Walz

Raúl M. Grijalva

Charles A. Gonzalez

